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Mori Ōgai, “The Grouch” – A *Kanshi* (Sino-Japanese Poem) about Paintings for Sale in a Modern Department Store

DOI 10.1515/asia-2017-0038

Abstract: Mori Ōgai 森鷗外 (1862–1922) stands at the fountainhead of modern Japanese literature. He is most famous for his prose writings: the groundbreaking short story, *Maihime* 舞姫 (The Danseuse); the full-length novel, *Gan* 雁 (The Wild Goose); and a half-dozen lengthy historical biographies. Much of Ōgai’s most creative writing is found in his translations. In *Sokkyō shijin* 即興詩人, Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Improvisatore* is transformed into mesmerizing quasi-classical Japanese. *Fausuto* ファウスト, written in a pithy Japanese vernacular full of wit, provides the first full-length translation of the Goethe classic. And his renderings of plays by Ibsen and Strindberg stand at the forefront of modern Japanese theatre. Mori Ōgai’s Sino-Japanese poems are especially important. They are revealing in biographical terms, the better to understand Ōgai (the person, the author, the public figure); in historical terms, to comprehend better the era in which he wrote, as well as how he experienced it and perceived earlier periods; and in literary terms, the better to appreciate his achievement as a writer. The selection presented here is revelatory on all three counts. One should keep in mind that, by writing in classical Chinese, Ōgai was not only participating in a centuries-long tradition in Japan. He was also “enacting civilization”, as it were, by writing in the pan-East Asian idiom that anyone educated was assumed to know. By the time the following poem was written, such a view had become quite conservative, if not reactionary.

Keywords: idealism, department store, art, wit, irony, materialism, *kanshi*

1 Introduction

Until recent times, cultural figures in the West like Erasmus, Rabelais, and Milton wrote treatises and literary works in Latin. Similarly, well into the twentieth

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century, major Japanese writers composed poetry and prose in “classical Chinese” — *kanshi* 漢詩 (Sino-Japanese poems) and *kanbun* 漢文 (Sino-Japanese prose) — writings that comprise the most neglected area of Japanese literature period

In June of 1918, four years before his death, Mori Ōgai 森鷗外 (1862–1922) wrote a *kanshi* for an album of paintings by the artist Koito Gentarō 小糸源太郎 (1887–1978). Koito was a Western-style artist whose early paintings “show great attention to realistic detail; the later ones reflect the influence of such artists of the School of Paris as Derain.”¹

Although Ōgai was well connected in art circles,² the fact that the Matsugen Restaurant run by the main branch of Koito’s family was located close to where Ōgai lived may have been a factor in the former’s solicitation of the piece.³ In the poem’s title, “Composed on ‘A Shiragi Album’” (*‘Shiragi gachō’ daiji* 「白木畫帖」題辭),⁴ “Shiragi” refers to Shiragiya Gofukuten 白木屋呉服店, Shiragiya Drygoods Store.⁵ Koito at one time worked in the business’s publicity department. But Ōgai’s response could hardly have been used as advertisement for the concern — if ever that was Koito’s intention.

In the poem, Ōgai is grumpy at the fact that works of art are for sale in such a public venue, where “they peddle paintings.” Merchants “flaunt hundreds of goods laid out in rows.” Nowadays, he says, “No one has scruples about deceiving others”; with money, one can “arrogate prominence.” In a word, the “essential spirit” of painting “should not be sullied by the marketplace.”

1 Roberts 1976: 87; namely, André Derain (1880–1954).

2 In December the year before, Ōgai had received joint appointment as Director of the Imperial Museum and Library (celebrated in #219). (Numbers refer to the *kanshi* as treated in Kotajima 2000–2001; the poem on “A Shiragi Album” is #226.) Earlier in 1899, together with the art historian Ōmura Seigai 大村西崖, Ōgai had brought out an *Outline of Aesthetics* (*Shinbi kōryō* 審美綱領); Lewin 1989: 285–287 [2001: 82–84]; Pörtner 2014: 158–159); and in 1915 he wrote a dedicatory *kanshi* for the groundbreaking work by Ōmura on Buddhist sculpture (#174; Wixted 2011: 106–107). Ōgai also dedicated *kanshi* to the painters Yamamoto Hōsui 山本芳翠 (#155) and Noguchi Chikako 野口親子 (#198), composed a piece for a collection of paintings by Nakamura Fusetsu 中村不折 (#204), and wrote a poem for the collection by Shimada Yūkichi 島田勇吉 that included work by Nakamura (#207). For more on the social dimension to dedicatory *kanshi*, see Wixted 2014b: 187–200.

3 The Matsugenrō 松源樓 appears in *Gan* 雁 (The Wild Goose), probably Ōgai’s most famous work. Prints of Matsugenrō by Toyoharu Kunichika 豊原國周 (1835–1900) and Utagawa Kunitoshi (1847–1899) 歌川国利, with a second-floor view overlooking Shinobazu Pond in Ueno, are available online.

4 For details about the album, see Kotajima 2001: 13: 298.

5 Drygoods (or haberdashery) stores were the prototypes of modern department stores; some maintained the title well into the 1900s, see Oh 2012: 22–112, 117–121; Aso 2013: 169–202; Conant 2006: 12–14, 23 n. 36–38.

Ōgai's is an idealist view of art.⁶ The “essential spirit” that he posits for it is an abstract ideal; as such, it transcends the mundane. Paintings being an expression of art, they should not be “adulterated with mundane dirt.” Putting artwork on garish display, treating it as yet another consumer good, vulgarly introducing the material world of money — these detract from the very essence of art.⁷

This is not the only example of irritation in Ōgai's *kanshi*, but it is a memorable one. Elsewhere he shows anger at the person who wrote a *kanshi* critical of *Shintaishi shō* 新體詩抄 (A Selection of New-Style Poetry), the 1889 volume of experimental poem translations: “Some day the s.o.b. (who wrote the critique) will gnaw *his* navel” (他年豎子噬其臍, #140).⁸ He loses patience with his debate opponent, Imai Takeo 今井武夫, who in an article made punning reference to Ōgai's name by saying the latter's argument had been “beyond the pale” (*hōgai* 方外); Ōgai retorted, “Scurrilous scuttlebutt!” (流言飛文, #142).⁹ And elsewhere he shows distinct irritation at being expected to write a poem in *de facto* repayment for being given an unsolicited seal.¹⁰

It is noteworthy that Ōgai does not criticize the quality of the paintings on display in the store: “Their makers are all talented craftsmen.”¹¹ Nor does his non-reference to the quality of Koito's album necessarily indicate a negative view of it. Ōgai often did not praise the things he was asked to write dedicatory pieces for.¹² In some cases, perhaps in this one, it appears to have been a way of complying with the request while partially undermining it, or at least deflecting attention from it.

With customary wit, Ōgai makes ironic self-reference in the poem: “Moved by the scene, I both sigh and jeer, / And jeer at myself for being

6 For introduction to Ōgai's thought, see Dower 1963. For treatment of the sources for Ōgai's aesthetics, see Lewin 1989, 2001; further discussion is found in Pörtner 2014.

7 Ōgai's view was not unusual, and has continued until recently. “[T]he official inclusion of department store artistic practices in art history would undermine the concept of ‘fine art’ which the modern institution of art has been predicated upon. [...] The discipline of modern Japanese art history, under the sway of the notion of aesthetic autonomy, has been reluctant to look at artistic realities in which art was extensively involved in commercial interests, [...] [M]eanings and functions [...] were cloaked in the discourse of ‘fine art’” (Oh 2012: xv–xvi).

8 Treated in Wixted 2013: 137–141.

9 Treated in Wixted 2014–2015: 69–86.

10 “By Way of Reply to Kuwata Meikai” (復桑田鳴海): “Bestowed a seal in expectation of poetry lines, / When will I be clear of this debt? / But how could you know: I'm lazy in the extreme? / So leave the seal; I hope you'll forget the matter.” 惠印求詩句 / 何時此債償 / 寧知吾懶甚 / 留印待君忘 (#203).

11 The problem was “not that the caliber of the artists and works that department stores sponsored was not high enough” (Oh 2012: xv).

12 For listing of all of Ōgai's dedicatory *kanshi*, see Wixted 2014b: 193–196.

out-of-joint with the times.” I might laugh and cry, but the joke is in part on me. And a wider world is implied that perhaps includes ironic reference to himself: “Is it only painters who are to be berated, / For not remaining true by starving on West Mountain?”

Not without reason does Mori Ōgai come across in this poem as “The Grouch.” At the same time, the *kanshi* is “classic Ōgai”: a mix of sardonic wit, pointed comment, and unsparing irony.¹³

2 Translation

- 1 大賈不深藏
Taiko wa fukaku osamezu
 Dàgǔ bù shēn cáng

- 2 街耀列百貨
Gen'yō shite hyakka o tsuranu
 Xuànyào liè bǎihuò [KA /huò]

- 3 錦繡粲成堆
Kinshū san to shite tai o nashi
 Jǐnxiù càn chéng duī

- 4 傾都此息駕
Keito koko ni ga o todomu
 Qīngdū cǐ xī jià GA /jià

- 5 乃復鬻畫圖
Sunawachi mata gazu o hisagi
 Nǎi fù yù huàtú

- 6 丹青光相射
Tansei hikari ai-iru
 Dānqīng guāng xiāng shè SHA /shè

¹³ Treatment of the poem follows the format outlined in Wixted 2014a. Ōgai's *kanshi* is a twenty-two-line *koshi* (old-style poem, a genre he favored for witty repartee), see Wixted 2014–2015: 64–65, 69–86. *Koshi* are of indefinite length and require rhymes at the end of even-numbered lines. Two rhyme categories are employed in the poem: 去二十一(個)韻 at the end of Lines 2; 8, 10, 12; 18, 20, 22; and 去二十二(禍)韻 at the end of Lines 4, 6; 14, 16. The rhyme categories are close enough that in this poem their Sino-Japanese (*on*) readings all rhyme: KA, GA, etc. Rhyme words and their readings are highlighted below.

Great merchants no longer store things out-of-sight,
 But flaunt hundreds of goods laid out in rows.¹⁴
 Ornate embroideries, dazzling, form piles —
 The entire capital, here would halt its carriages.¹⁵
 Then, too, they peddle paintings¹⁶:
 Reds and greens, emitting shafts of light.¹⁷

7 作者皆良工

Sakusha mina ryōkō ni shite
 Zuòzhě jiē liánggōng

8 聲譽遠邇播

Seiyo enji ni makaretari
 Shēngyù yǎněr bō

HA /bō

9 紙紙世所珍

Shishi yo no chin to suru tokoro naru ni
 Zhǐzhǐ shì suǒ zhēn

10 何意混塵埃

Nan no i arite ka jinka ni majiru
 Héyì hùn chénkè

KA /kè [kuò]

11 感之嗟又嗤

Kore ni kanjite nageki mata azawarau
 Gǎnzhi jiē yòu chī

¹⁴ “In contrast to the more traditional approach of store clerks bringing out of storage select items for customer perusal, department stores introduced a culture of public display that encouraged customers to compare and evaluate competing items”; Hammond 2015.

¹⁵ Reportedly, when the entire Mitsui Gofukuten was transformed into a new exhibition-style shopping space, “On Muromachi-tōri, horse-drawn trams traffic was restricted to make way for the crowd that flocked to the front of the store, and a number of policemen were busy making a path for carriages” (*Jiji shinpō*, October 17, 1910), as cited in Oh 2012: 29.

¹⁶ In 1907, Mitsui (the modern Mitsukoshi) had been the first such store to establish a fine arts section; see Morishita 2010: 67–68.

¹⁷ Reds and greens: namely, cinnabar- and malachite-based pigments; when paired, the term refers metonymically to painting.

- 12 嗟我與時左 SA /zuǒ
Ware no toki to tagaeru o azawarau nari
 Chī wǒ yǔshí zuǒ
 Their makers are all talented craftsmen,
 Fame broadcast far and near.
 Their every canvas, what the world holds dear;
 But why adulterate them with mundane dirt?¹⁸
 Moved by the scene, I both sigh and jeer,
 And jeer at myself for being out-of-joint with the times.
- 13 富貴舉世求
Fukī yo o agete motome
 Fùguì jǔ shì qiú
- 14 無人忌巧詐 SA /zhà
Kōki o imu hito nashi
 Wú rén jì qiǎozhà
- 15 有錢擅顯榮
Zeni araba ken'ei o hoshimama ni shi
 Yǒu qián shàn xiǎnróng
- 16 無錢遇嫚罵 BA /mà
Zeni nakunba manba ni au
 Wú qián yù mànmà
 Wealth and high station, the whole world seeks;
 No one has scruples about deceiving others.
 Having money, you can arrogate prominence;
 Without money, you are met with scorn.
- 17 豈獨責畫師
A ni hitori semen ya gashi no
 Qǐ dú zé huàshī
- 18 不守西山 GA /è
Seizan no ga o mamorazaru o
 Bù shǒu Xīshān è

¹⁸ The compound employed, 塵埃, is an elegant variation of 塵埃, “the dust (or dirt) of the mundane world.”

- 19 混俗非所嫌
Zoku ni majiru wa kirau tokoro ni arazu
 Hùnsú fēi suǒ xián
- 20 志尙莫磨 ZA /cuò
Shishō maza suru nakare
 Zhìshàng mò mócuò
- 21 元氣溢素縑
Genki soken ni afureba
 Yuánqì yì sùjiān
- 22 不受市井 WA /wò
Shisei no kegare o ukeji
 Bú shòu shìjǐng wò

Is it only painters who are to be berated,
 For not remaining true by starving on West Mountain?¹⁹
 The intromission of the vulgar is not what one deplores;
 Rather, my concern is noble aspirations — Don't erode them!²⁰
 The essential spirit that overflows plain silk-canvas
 Should not be sullied by the marketplace.

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¹⁹ At the time of the transition from the Shang to the Zhou dynasty in early China, Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊 chose to starve themselves on West Mountain rather than eat the grain of the succeeding dynasty. By implication, painters and other artists should resist the temptations of the materialistic, commercial world. Better that they, in effect, starve. And the lesson appears to have wider implication for Ōgai. He is saying: Everyone, myself included, should stay true to their idealist values; how many of us do?

²⁰ The unusual compound used for "erode" (磨挫), rendered more literally, means "to break down by grinding away."

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